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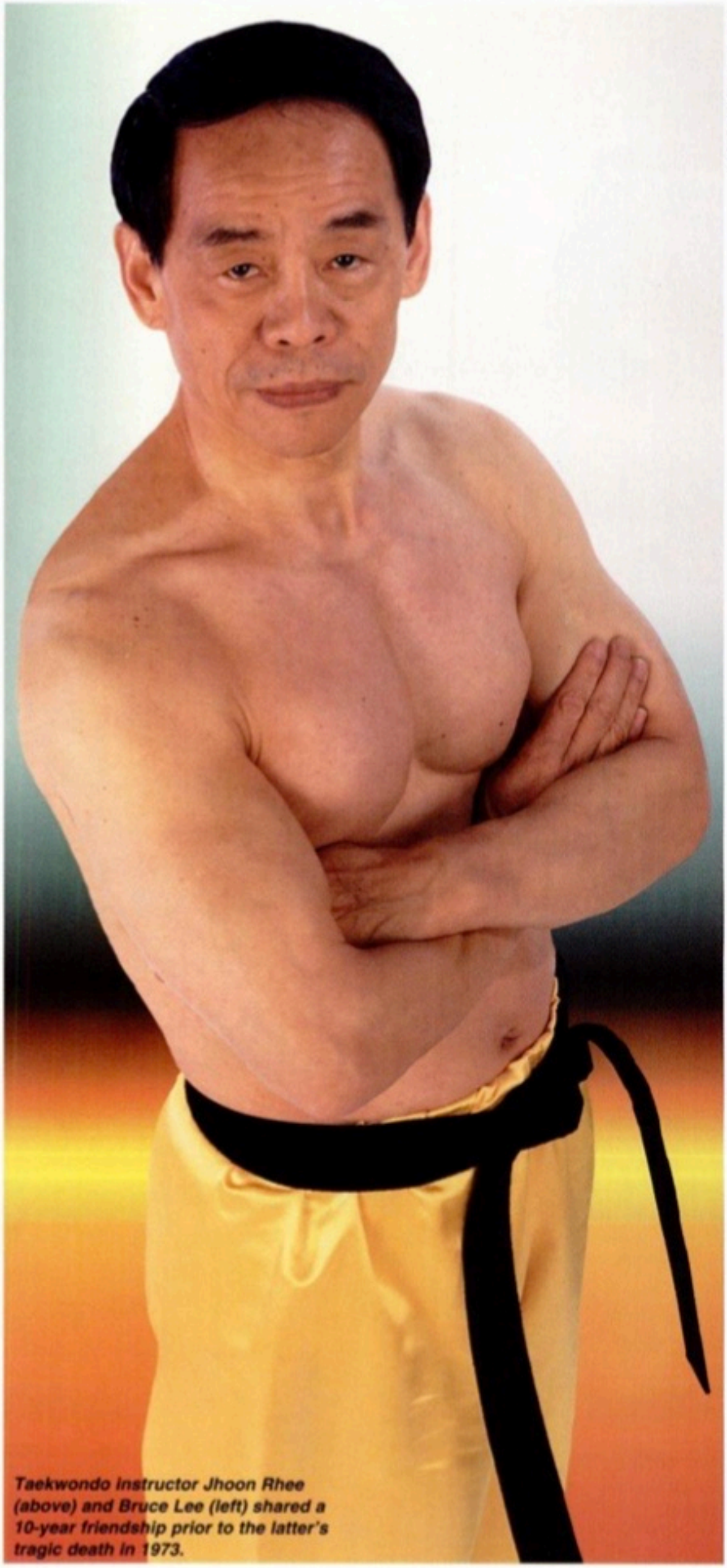

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Taekwondo instructor Jhoon Rhee (above) and Bruce Lee (left) shared a 10-year friendship prior to the latter's tragic death in 1973.

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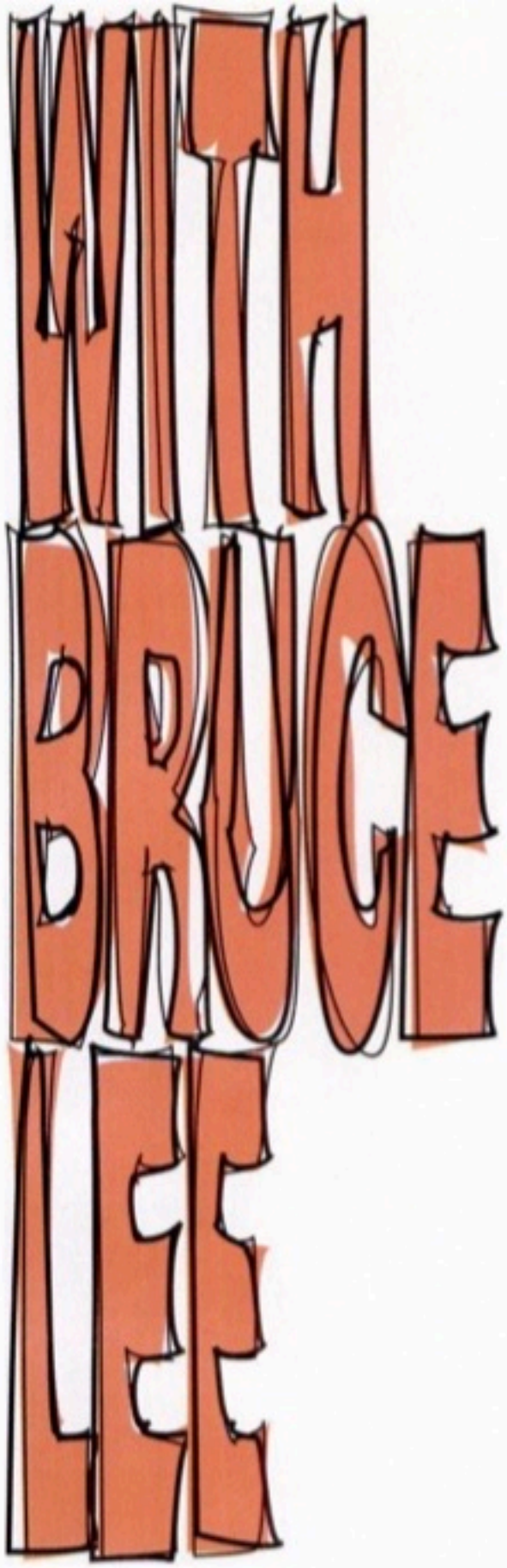

Taekwondo Pioneer Jhoon Rhee Recounts His 10-Year Friendship With the "Dragon"

Interview by Thomas Nilsson

Few people have a martial arts resumé as impressive as that of Jhoon Rhee, the so-called "father of American taekwondo." Rhee created the safety gear students wear when they spar. He is the orchestrator of "martial ballet"—synchronized taekwondo sessions performed to classical music. He is noted for teaching congressmen martial arts on Capitol Hill and for arranging tournaments between Republicans and Democrats. His noble efforts to set a proper course for America's youth have been well-documented. His Jhoon Rhee Foundation is involved in teaching his "Joy of Discipline" program to public schoolchildren, and his Jhoon Rhee Institute continues to maintain a highly visible martial arts profile not only in the United States, but also in Russia, where Rhee has opened an additional 65 schools.

Yet few people know this 63-year-old Black Belt Hall of Fame member had a tumultuous childhood, in which he was often bullied at school. Few know about his harrowing escape from communist clutches at the outset of the Korean War. Or about his convoluted journey to the "land of the brave and the free." Or that he can do a mind-boggling 100 push-ups in one minute. Or about Rhee's vow to live to be 137 years old.

And fewer still know about his close friendship with Bruce Lee. Rhee, in fact, is credited with teaching Lee the finer points of high kicking. During the course of their 10-year friendship, Lee wrote nearly 50 letters to Rhee, as the two exchanged concepts and ideas on martial arts training. The letters form the basis of a book Rhee is writing titled Bruce Lee and I.

In the following interview, Rhee recounts the time he spent with Lee, from their training sessions together, to their more personal, introspective moments, to his Hong Kong visit with the "Dragon" two weeks before Lee died. —*Editor*

BLACK BELT: What prompted you to write a book about your friendship with Lee?

JHOON RHEE: About two years ago, I went through all the letters that I have received from Bruce, and I just couldn't believe how much he had done for me. I didn't remember most of them, but they were very interesting. Despite his young age, Bruce was already quite a philosopher, and I felt I really should share his true character with all of his fans.

BB: Being the training fanatic that he was, it's hard to imagine when Lee had the time to take pen to paper.

RHEE: Well, nobody is too busy for important things. I think it was very important to Bruce to keep up a correspondence with his friends. He really valued his friends, and he was never too busy to write.

BB: And in those letters, Lee often waxed philosophical?

RHEE: Yes. Bruce studied philosophy for a while, and in one of his letters he wrote me a poem [titled] "Who am I? What am I?" If you read this little piece, I think you will see that there was a depth in his philosophy. He was a thinker.

BB: How did you meet Lee?

RHEE: We first met at Ed Parker's International Championships in Long Beach, California, on August 2, 1964, where we both gave demonstrations. I was 32 and Bruce was 23. I was very impressed with his demonstration—especially with his close-quarter hand techniques, which he delivered blindfolded—and with his showmanship as well. Bruce told me that he was impressed by my high jump kick that broke three boards eight feet up in the air, and also by my triple kick that I demonstrated. Bruce had an eight-millimeter home movie of my demonstration and kept it for many years. [His wife] Linda [Lee Cadwell] sent me that piece of film after his death.

Continued

Bruce Lee (below left) and Jhoon Rhee once trained together at a Southern California beach.

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Jhoon Rhee and Bruce Lee continued to communicate, primarily through the mail, after Lee began his busy film career (1-2).

"Bruce was really a good streetfighter, and I personally have never seen anybody, pound for pound, as strong as Bruce Lee."

PHOTO BY DOUG CHURCHILL

BB: High kicking was something new for the ever-practical Lee, who rarely kicked above waist level. Did you two ever break boards together?

RHEE: I think it was in 1967 when Bruce first broke boards. He saw a lot of them lying around in my garage and told me that he would like to try them out. He had never broken a board before, but only a few months later, Bruce broke more boards than I did! In fact, he side jump-kicked four one-inch dangling boards and broke every one of them. He really had tremendous momentum and power in his kicks. It's true that I was the one who first introduced high kicks to Bruce and, in return, Bruce gave me some ideas of hand techniques, mainly showing me how to be "non-telegraphic" when punching.

BB: Why do you think Lee is still popular nearly 23 years after his death?

RHEE: His name is still the biggest in the martial arts. When I went to Russia, I met people who didn't know about Muhammad Ali, but they all knew Bruce Lee. I think the reason for his [continuing] popularity is that he really electrified human emotions on the screen. Anybody who watches his movies feels this electricity. And Bruce also had something that most other people don't have: a tremendous charisma, on the screen and in life.

BB: Lee was a guest of honor at many of your tournaments, was he not?

RHEE: He was a guest of honor at my national championships for six consecutive years, from 1965 to 1970. Bruce performed two-finger push-ups, broke boards and knocked people out with his one-inch punch every time he came. In 1970, he came with his lovely wife Linda, they went on stage, and Linda was throwing Bruce all over the place. It was a pretty comical demonstration that people enjoyed very much.

BB: Some people felt Lee came off as

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Bruce Lee and Jhoon Rhee shared many theories on martial arts when they trained together (1-3).

cocky. What do you think?

RHEE: Some people thought Bruce was cocky, but with his skills, he had a right to be cocky. He was very young, and at that age everyone is a bit cocky. That attitude never bothered me. In fact, I liked Bruce's cockiness because he was never cocky in an "ugly" manner. His cockiness was quite "cute." Most people really loved him, and those martial artists who didn't were probably just jealous of his skills.

BB: Do you think Lee's attitude caused some people in the martial arts community to dislike him?

RHEE: Well, you know, everybody has their own opinions and, yes, Bruce made some enemies. But I too made enemies. No one can ever please everyone. There were a number of people who didn't like Bruce, but when you are as frank as he was, you cannot avoid offending people. I think there are some movie stars in Hong Kong who didn't like the success he achieved there. They were jealous.

BB: Did Lee ever tell you what he thought of *taekwondo* as a fighting art?

RHEE: Bruce never judged the [arts], claiming that taekwondo or karate were good or bad, he always judged the individual. He told me he found some taekwondo people that were good, and some that weren't as good.

BB: What were some of your impressions of Lee as your friendship with him evolved?

RHEE: Like everyone else, he grew physically and mentally over the years. After his TV series, *The Green Hornet,* was canceled, Bruce was out of work and he took on private students, but it didn't really pay all that well. He got by, but it was obviously a pretty frustrating time for him, and I think it was during this suffering period that Bruce really grew up mentally. Bruce always liked to joke and make people laugh; he was a very jovial person to be around. But he was also a very mature individual.

BB: When you and Lee worked out together, what did you two focus on?

RHEE: Most of the time we focused on kicks, but we also practiced punching once in a while. Bruce really loved sushi, so every time he stayed at my house, my wife fixed him a huge plate of sushi, and we could eat and train like mad until four or five o'clock in the morning.

BB: What was the most significant thing you learned from training with Lee, and vice versa?

Bruce Lee was a guest at Jhoon Rhee's prestigious martial arts tournament from 1965 to 1970.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JHOON RHEE

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RHEE: I think the most important thing I learned from Bruce was his hand techniques, his "non-telegraphic" punch. The most important thing I taught Bruce was probably my side kick. This is, in fact, a very difficult kick until you really know the finer mechanics of executing the kick. We really learned valuable things from each other.

BB: Some of Lee's old acquaintances have suggested that, at one point after training with some of his *wing chun* kung fu seniors during a trip to Hong Kong, he seriously considered giving up martial arts because he felt he had lost some of his speed and skill.

RHEE: I really can't see him ever thinking about quitting the martial arts, no matter what happened when he met with his old teachers or seniors. He had a martial arts soul; the martial arts was his life.

BB: How fast were Lee's techniques?

RHEE: Bruce was very fast, but more important was his excellent timing, his deceptiveness. Good timing is essential. Muhammad Ali was a good fighter, not because of his speed. but because of his timing. I really felt that Bruce valued good timing more than just speed.

BB: Did you have any inkling that Lee would achieve the level of success he did?

RHEE: I always knew Bruce would become a movie and martial arts superstar because he was a very charismatic person with a great sense of humor, he was very articulate, and he was a very determined man. He was determined to become a superstar. I was actually sitting next to him when he wrote his "My Definite Chief Aim" in January, 1969 (in which Lee predicted he would become the first Oriental superstar in the United States). At that time, I really didn't question whether he would manage to achieve has aim or not, I just knew that, with his quality, talent, determination and commitment in martial arts, things would happen. I have never seen anybody that

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"I too have heard people who think Bruce wasn't a real fighter, but he really was."

committed to martial arts. Whenever I visited him, he was always involved with something new—stretching, lifting weights and so on. He didn't even stop when we were talking.

BB: What are the biggest misconceptions people have about Lee?

RHEE: Some people thought Bruce wasn't particularly friendly, but he was, especially when he liked somebody. Then he would give out his heart. If Bruce liked you, he would do anything for you within his power.

BB: What do you think of Lee's movies?

RHEE: They are the greatest! They are really electrifying. I was invited to the grand opening of *Enter The Dragon*, and the movie was out of this world.

BB: How do you feel about martial arts movies in general?

RHEE: I think some are good and some are not so good. But, overall, these movies—good or bad—have promoted the martial arts industry and they have created an awareness of the martial arts. I'm happy to see how far martial arts have come up in our society. The name taekwondo is now a household word, not only in America, but around the world. All in all, I feel that martial arts movies have done a good job of publicizing the arts.

BB: There are those who have labeled Lee a "celluloid fighter," claiming he couldn't fight for real. What is your opinion?

RHEE: I too have heard people who think Bruce wasn't a real fighter, but he really was. When he was in high school in Hong Kong, he fought in a Golden Gloves boxing tournament and knocked out the reigning champion after only a few weeks of training. Bruce was really a good streetfighter, and I personally have never seen anybody, pound for pound, as strong as Bruce Lee. Now,

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Bruce Lee (center, above) and Jhoon Rhee (above right) conduct an interview on Dominican Republic television in 1970.

when he is no longer with us, it's pretty natural that there are some people who try to discredit Bruce. This does not change the actual facts. I *know* Bruce was a very good fighter.

BB: What sides to Lee did you see that perhaps the public never did?

RHEE: My friendship with Bruce was very entertaining. Whenever he was around, he always made you laugh. But Bruce was also a very deep person who loved his wife and children very much. He was a good father and a good husband.

BB: Do you remember any of the jokes or pranks Lee played on people?

RHEE: Yes. I recall him telling a guy who talked a lot that he would get his tongue sunburned if he kept talking so much. Another joke Bruce told went as follows: A Japanese emperor wanted to hire a bodyguard with swordfighting skills. The first applicant was a Japanese samurai, and when asked what he could do, the samurai opened a matchbox and a fly flew out. The samurai drew his sword and cut the fly in half. The emperor was very impressed and called for the next applicant, who repeated the trick, only he cut the fly into four pieces, impressing the emperor even more. The third applicant was a Jewish samurai. He too opened a matchbox and a fly flew out. The Jewish samurai drew his sword, but nothing happened. "Well?" the emperor asked impatiently. "Your majesty," the Jewish samurai replied, "if you closely examine the fly, you will find that it has been circumcised!"

BB: When was your final conversation with Lee, and did you notice anything different or unusual about him?

RHEE: Bruce died on July 20, 1973, and I last saw him in Hong Kong on July 6th. He saw me off at the airport after my work on the movie *[When Taekwondo Strikes]* there. Then, 24 hours prior to his death, Bruce called me to tell me that the movie was all edited and finished. The next day, I heard of his death on the radio. I called [his wife] Linda immediately, and she confirmed the sad news. I think I was one of the last American people with whom Bruce spoke before he died. I never got the feeling that something was wrong with Bruce when we last met. He looked good, and when we spoke on the phone, he sounded like a very happy man.

BB: Lee reportedly collapsed several times in the year before his death. Did he discuss any of these incidents with you?

RHEE: No, he never mentioned any of these collapses. But he was very concerned when he came to Los Angeles for a physical checkup [that year]. He was so proud of the results. He told me that the doctors told him he had the body of an 18-year-old. The test results made him very relieved, and when I heard the news of his death on the radio, I just couldn't believe it. I was shocked, and the loss to the whole world was terrible.

BB: Did Lee reveal to you any of his plans for the future before he died?

RHEE: He always wanted to become the greatest Asian star in the world, to be the number-one movie star. That was really his chief aim, and he used his martial arts to achieve his goal.

About the interviewer: Thomas Nilsson is a Handen, Sweden-based freelance writer.

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